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Ephesians: The 'Little' Problem (Part I)

Ephesians 2:1-4

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I hope this series on Ephesians has been drawing you into this tremendous letter which so helpfully unfolds to us what life is all about, and you have been able to see that its great theme is the unifying work of Jesus Christ, the restoring work of Jesus, how he has come to smash every barrier among men and women, to span every chasm, to break down every obstacle which divides and fragments humanity, and to unite all things together in him. And this has already begun - it's not something he is going to do in one blinding flash at the end of time. The good news of the gospel is that he has already begun, and I believe we have very clearly seen this exciting unity develop right here at CPC. And we know from 1:19 that it is his 'incomparably great power' that allows all of this to take place right here.

Last week we looked some more at Paul's prayer for the Ephesians and his recognition that we follow Christ into a spiritual battle with the forces of darkness. But we know that God is more powerful than these demonic forces - Scripture teaches us that 'greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world' (1 John 4:4), and from 1:19 we come to understand the incomparable greatness of his power, and that Christ has been given dominion over the 'principalities and powers' as well as authority over the church. And this is very important to get. Because if you take note of the power of God, your life is never the same. When you really see the resources made available to us in Christ, and they begin to hit you with the impact they deserve, you will never live the same way again. That's why Paul prays that the power of God may be evident to us, the power which breaks through the problems of men and women, the power which can bring peace to the Middle East, the power which can restore harmony and joy in the midst of death.

But, Paul says here in chapter 2, you will never understand these problems until you grasp the difficulties which our Lord faces, the condition of mankind in its lost state, and how absolutely impossible it is for man to do anything to change himself. It takes the great, incomparable power of God, and nothing else will suffice, not even Colin Powell. That's the theme of the first half of chapter 2.

In these four verses at the beginning of chapter 2 is the revelation of a truth so difficult for us to understand and grasp, and believe, that most of us tone it down immediately, that is, we simply water it down. We don't accept it. We won't believe it. As a consequence, we have no realistic outlook on where we are - neither on the tremendous hopelessness of our condition if we are without Christ, or on the glory and wonder of our position if we are in Christ. But IF you want to have your heart set on fire, then listen carefully to these verses so that we might see what is the incomparable greatness of his power which has cured this condition! [Read verse 1]

There is the apostle's great analysis of the problem. This is the difficulty which Jesus Christ faces when he comes to a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. And what it takes to break through this condition is nothing less than incomparably great power.

You see, he says we are dead in transgressions and sins. This is what is so hard for us to believe. If you go to a high school kid who is ready to go out for football, feeling the challenge of a new sport, involved with his friends in all kinds of exciting activities, and

looking forward to building a life on his own, and you say, "You're dead," he will look at you with pity in his eyes. "What kind of person are you, some kind of nut?"

But if you listen to Paul's analysis of the problem, I think you'll see what he means, and how accurate is his description. For there are two basic characteristics of death which we immediately associate with a dead person. One is their utter *impotence*, their *powerlessness*.

When I was in seminary, we had an opportunity to tour a mortuary. The owners allowed the professor to lead the small class through the back rooms, and we found ourselves in the room where the bodies were lying out on slabs, covered by sheets. Being tall, I tended to let the shorter people step in front of me, which worked well in this situation. The professor walked up to one of the bodies and pulled back the sheet and said to the young man standing closest to him, "Tell him about Jesus."

Well … let's just say it was a moment cemented in time. The student looked at the body and looked at the professor and looked at the body and opened his mouth and closed his mouth and just stood there for the moment that it took for the professor to rescue him. A dead person is impotent. How impossible it is to reach him. How difficult, how absolutely helpless is it for him to respond to any appeal, to do anything constructive in his condition. So *impotence* is the first characteristic we identify with a dead person.

The second characteristic is *corruption*. The reason funeral homes exist is that dead bodies tend immediately to deteriorate. They decay, they fall apart, they lose their consistency, they begin to rot, to smell. You remember that in the story of Lazarus, Martha said to Jesus, 'By this time there is a bad odor. He's been there in the tomb for four days." So that's also a mark of death - *corruption*. We have impotence and corruption.

And Paul uses two words to relate to these conditions of death - transgressions and sins. I'd like to begin with **transgressions**. The word 'transgression' is translated in the RSV as 'trespass.' We are dead through trespasses, dead through transgressions. This is the word that comes from a basic Greek word which means 'to miss your step.' If I start to walk off this chancel platform and I aim at the first step but I miss it and come down on another step, that's a trespass or a transgression - I have transgressed the first step. I have misstepped but I didn't intend to - I aimed at the first step and intended to hit it with my foot, but I missed it. Though my intention was right, the result of my action was wrong.

That's what Paul says characterizes humanity. We are guilty of missteps. We don't mean to do it, but we end up missing the way. We start out with great ideals, most of us, with an image of what we would like to be. We aim at that, we try to be that, but somewhere we miss the mark, don't we? We don't fulfill our ideals, we don't realize our dreams. And even when we achieve the things we thought we wanted, we find them to be hollow pleasures indeed, empty and unsatisfying. We suffer from what some people call 'destination sickness' = the malady of having arrived where you wanted to go, but not liking it when you get there, and remaining unsatisfied. That's the impotence of human life - we can't fulfill our best ideals. No matter how hard we try, how much we resolve, something keeps us from them. This is a mark of death which is present in humanity everywhere.

But beyond that, Paul says, there are our **sins**. There are not only the times we fail when we meant to do right, but there are times when we intentionally and deliberately do wrong. *Sin* is the violation of truth when we know it to be truth. We know God's truth tells us to go to each other with our problems or complaints or hurt feelings, but we consciously don't do this, and tell someone else, involving someone else in something that is usually none of their business, causing an escalation of whatever problem we perceived.

This doing of intentional wrong is not a misstep, but an intentional step, something we call sin. This is what creates the downward slant, the deterioration of life. Most of us start with rather high ideals and wholesome attitudes - we approach life with good moral standards because of the homes and training and background we have had - not all of us, but many. And we are precisely the ones who find it most difficult to believe this passage. Yet all of us can remember that some of the things we do now with utter disregard, and total acceptance, horrified us when they were first suggested to us. And even when we first did them, we were uneasy of spirit. But now they have become commonplace, and we indulge without any difficulty. That marks the downward trend, the deteriorating faculty in life. This is the mark of death, an increasing corruption which, when it begins to be evident all over in our community, in our society, produces this awful, terrible sense of despair and hopelessness and corruption which troubles us on every side.

That's Paul's analysis of our 'little' problem. We are dead (impotence and corruption) by way of misstepping transgressions, AND intentional violation-of-known-truth sins. I leave it to you to see how accurate it is when you set his analysis against life, but I believe no other philosophy can ever explain human life adequately. This is the condition of humankind.

What's behind all this? Why is this so universally true? I'll be back in the pulpit two weeks from now to give you the answer.

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